

## Martha Lynn Oathout Thompson

On Easter Sunday bells will ring different tunes, thanks to Martha Lynn Thompson. She's a teacher, arranger ... and she's published.

BY HEATHER HAHN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Martha Lynn Thompson raises her arms, smiles brightly and counts "1 ... and ... 2."

Around her stand the 13 men and women of the Angelus Ringers, one of 11 bell choirs at St. James United Methodist Church in Little Rock. The ringers have their handbells clasped close to their chests, and their eyes fixed on Thompson.

At a sweep of her hand, they peal the sprightly melody of the "Rigaudon" movement of Handel's Water Music. With the manual dexterity of magicians, the ringers rapidly switch among four or six bells each to play notes in five octaves. The music sounds like it's being played by an orchestra of crystal.

Thompson is not only the steady conductor; she is the one who transformed the Handel masterpiece into bell music. On this Monday night, the choir is playing Thompson's arrangement for only the third time. She still isn't sure her work is ready for publication.

"You never know whether it's going to work or not," she said. "I think you always have to be willing to start over if necessary, to rewrite ... I don't want to publish something that's second-rate."

In the world of handbell music, few people are as renowned as Thompson, an Arkansas native.

The 67-year-old has published more than 300 arrangements ranging from simple hymns to complex classical works.

On any Sunday morning, at least one church bell choir in the United States is likely to be playing a song with Thompson's name on it.

"I imagine there will be choirs on Easter Sunday that will be playing her music," says Beth Watson, past president of the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers — the nation's handbell music association. Watson is also the music director at Northwest Hills United Methodist Church in Austin, Texas.

Under Watson's leadership, Thompson was named Honorary Life Member of the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers — the group's highest recognition.

"She has always had the theory that she will not send anything off to be published until

she has tried it out with choirs and knows that the piece will work,” Watson said. “That then makes her music so much more marketable because it’s been tried out.”

Born Martha Lynn Oathout in Little Rock, she grew up at a time when handbell choirs were still rare in the South.

Her father, Walter Oathout (pronounced OATH-out), co-owned a number of Little Rock restaurants. Her mother, Helen, was a homemaker who, after her husband’s death, joined his business partners in starting the Black Angus restaurant. Martha has a younger brother, Marshall, who is a chemist for DuPont.

Her first introduction to music came not from bells but from the piano lessons her parents began sending her to when she was in the second grade.

But the young girl didn’t relish practicing until the summer after her eighth-grade year. That’s when she advanced to taking organ lessons with John Summers, the choirmaster and organist at First Methodist Church in downtown Little Rock.

“I can’t remember a time after I started studying organ that I did not want to be a church organist,” she says.

Thompson, who had grown up attending Immanuel Baptist Church, volunteered to play for Sunday School classes. She also began substituting as an organist in churches around town. During her junior and senior year at Central High School, she regularly played for children’s church at First Methodist.

She remained focused on music during her senior year even in 1957, during the Central High integration crisis.

She followed the news events unfolding at the school. She knew when the National Guard first blocked black students from entering and when President Eisenhower called in the 101st Airborne to desegregate the school.

But inside the classrooms, she says, all was quiet. She couldn’t hear the frenzied mobs outside, and barely saw any of the black students during the school year.

After graduation, she attended Henderson State Teachers College (now Henderson State University) in Arkadelphia. Teaching, she believed, would be her best avenue for supporting herself.

As planned, she began her career as a music teacher at what was then Ridgeroad Junior High School in the North Little Rock School District. But she soon learned of an opening for an organist at St. Paul’s Methodist Church in Little Rock.

The music director at the church was G. Felix Thompson Jr., another Henderson alumnus who was five years her senior. The two had heard of each other, but had never met.

“When Martha Lynn came to try out for the organist position,” he recalls, “[the minister] turned to me while she was playing and said, ‘Now Felix, not only can she play the organ, but she’s goodlooking.’ And that was right. She was a very fine-looking young lady.”

Felix Thompson asked her out for ice cream after a revival service one night. The two have been together in sweet harmony ever since.

In December, the couple celebrated their 44th wedding anniversary.

“Martha Lynn is like Mary Poppins,” her husband says. “She’s just about perfect in every way. I really mean that as a compliment because what you see is what she is.”

## TELEVISION DEBUT

In Felix, Martha Lynn Thompson found someone who shared her passion for classical and sacred music.

But their work at St. Paul was not enough to pay the bills. They both continued to teach music in public schools and give piano lessons on the side.

They finally got the chance to work together full time when the father of one of Felix Thompson’s junior high students invited the couple to start a choral program at the Methodist Children’s Home in Little Rock.

Their choir included children from kindergarten to high school. Most had been removed from their families because of abuse or neglect.

“The superintendent’s philosophy at that time was that music is very important,” Martha Lynn Thompson says, “and if we didn’t do anything else, we could teach the children how to behave.”

But the Thompsons did much more than that, says Dolores King, who spent her teen years at the home. The couple — whom the children called “Mr. and Mrs. T” — provided the structure and affection that King says she and the other kids needed.

“Mr. Thompson, as the director, was the person who laid down the law, and you followed it,” says King, who now lives in Omaha, Neb. “Martha Lynn was a quiet person. She was like the gears in the clock. You couldn’t see them but you knew they were working.”

King said the music program that the couple started gave children who didn't have much something to take pride in.

After only three or four rehearsals with their new choir, the Thompsons learned they were about to make their television debut. The superintendent of the Children's Home had volunteered the group to sing live on KATV, Channel 7 at 7 a.m. each Sunday for a month.

The choir's appearances proved popular.

"We had a number of people say, 'You know that meant so much to me because I was sick, and I could turn it on and be comforted,'" Martha Lynn Thompson says.

The home's superintendent next arranged for the choir to sing and help lead worship services at Methodist churches around the state. The Thompsons and children traveled thousands of miles in a rickety school bus.

The couple eventually split the elementary and secondary students into two choirs. They added handbells to their music program in the mid-1960s. After a minister's daughter died, the Children's Home received so many memorial gifts in her honor that the minister suggested buying something for the music program. The Thompsons requested a set of handbells.

Soon, the home's bell choir was traveling around the state.

## A NEED FOR MUSIC

The home's superintendent bought the ringers blue blazers and light blue button-down shirts. Martha Lynn Thompson, a talented seamstress, sewed all the girls' skirts.

She said the choir members benefited from staying in the homes of church members during their travels. After each visit, the Thompsons required each of the choir members to write thank-you notes to their hosts.

King, who participated in the home's bell choir, said she still values the life lesson of the importance of thank-you notes.

"[Martha Lynn] was the role model that all of the children needed," King says. "She was the kind of person you wished could be your mother."

Julie Witt was not involved in the home's music program, but she also has fond memories of the Thompsons.

When Witt arrived at the home at 16, she didn't have many clothes. So Martha Lynn

Thompson volunteered to sew her a dress.

“She really put a lot into it,” says Witt, who now lives in St. Paul, Minn. “She gave a lot of her time, but that is just the way she is.”

At the time, bell choirs were still fairly new in the United States. Handbells had existed in England at least as far back as the 18th century, but didn’t cross the Atlantic until the early 20th century. The American Guild of English Handbell Ringers wasn’t formed until 1954.

Few musical arrangements were available for handbells, so Thompson began arranging her own. She wanted to ensure the home’s bell choir had a piece they could call their own when they attended national bell festivals, which they began doing annually in 1967.

One of her earliest arrangements, “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers,” still remains one of her most popular. But she receives no royalties on it. She sold the work to the publisher for \$50.

“The next time, I thought I had learned my lesson, so I took \$75,” she says with a laugh. “Royalties are a plus, but they aren’t my reason for doing this. I never write a piece because I want it to be published. My reason for doing this is to share or because we need it for one of our choirs.”

## A CHURCH HOME

She continued producing new bell arrangements even as her and her husband’s work at the Children’s Home transformed into positions at St. James’ United Methodist Church.

In 1968, the new congregation began worshipping in the chapel of the Children’s Home. The superintendent again volunteered the Thompsons — this time to lead the church’s music when they weren’t on the road with the home’s musical groups.

Two years later, the church hired Martha Lynn Thompson as organist and her husband as music director. They moved with the church to its present location in west Little Rock, and over the next three decades, they built the music program from one adult choir and small youth bell choir to 20 bell and choral groups involving all ages.

Often, the Thompsons spent 12-hour days at the church.

The bell program got a big boost on its first day, Martha Lynn Thompson said. One of the girls at the church rode the bus, and when she got to the church, she encouraged the other kids to join her at bell practice.

“Those people eventually became church members,” Thompson says.

Leslie Layton, whose family began going to St. James when it still met at the Children’s Home, was one of the church’s first ringers.

“It was hard, and you knew you could not miss bell choir,” she says. “We learned a lot of responsibility. You showed up when you were expected and did what you were supposed to do. That is something they taught us.”

She knew that if she were absent, her part simply wouldn’t get played.

But she stressed that the experience was fun, too. The church’s youth bell choir attended a national handbell festival each summer. Layton’s father, a physician, and mother were invariably among the trip’s chaperones. Parents, she said, would use their vacation time to attend the festival.

She now plays in a women’s bell choir under Martha Lynn Thompson’s direction.

Then as now, Thompson often supplied new arrangements to add to the repertoire.

“It took a lot of music to have enough for all the many bell choirs,” she says. “It grew out of need. It grew out of the ringers’ interest. It grew out of their desire to have something that was theirs.”

When the church added bell choirs for elementary school students, Thompson decided to create more beginner’s music. She found an eager collaborator in Fran Callahan, a longtime piano teacher who had joined St. James in 1972.

Callahan recalled that when she and her husband first visited the church, she was immediately struck by the sight of Thompson at her organ.

“I thought she’s one of the most beautiful people I’ve ever seen, and of course, she plays like an angel,” Callahan says. “At the end of the service, I introduced myself, and we just hit it off. As my husband and I went out, we both said, ‘This is our church.’”

Callahan had never seen a handbell before she came to St. James, but the Thomp-sons soon brought her in as a substitute ringer. Within a few years, Callahan had volunteered to lead one of the children’s bell choirs.

Together, Callahan and Martha Lynn Thompson compiled 14 collections of beginner’s bell arrangements, including the “Ready to Ring” series.

David Weck, handbell editor at the Agape division of Hope Publishing Co. in Illinois, said many of the series remain top sellers for his company.

Callahan said she and Thompson are still receiving royalties from sales in Australia, Canada, Japan, Finland, Hungary and Taiwan.

## RETIREMENT WITHOUT LEISURE

The Thompsons officially retired from St. James in 2002.

But the two remain very active at church and in bell music in general.

Martha Lynn Thompson still directs two bell choirs, as well as a six-person small ensemble group. Her husband directs the Alumni Ringers made up of members who grew up playing in the church's youth bell choirs.

In recent years, she also has earned a national reputation for her mastery of Finale, the complicated software used for music notation.

Her husband said bell music directors and arrangers from across the United States contact her nearly every day, seeking advice on Finale.

"Sure, these folks could have gotten help from a professional computer guru," he says. "But so many of these bell composers are just plain folks and they want, fast, simple, clear, concise answers and they know that Martha Lynn is a 'pro' at doing this.

"Without a doubt, no one's computer questions or problems are ever put on the back burner — maybe that's why so many of our meals are prepared in the crockpot."

This summer she plans to lead a class on using Finale at the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers National Director's Seminar in Orlando, Fla.

She said she is continually looking for musical works that might be adapted to bells.

Each year she and her husband watch the New Year's concert of the Vienna Philharmonic on television, and she said she often gets ideas for bell music from the performance. She heard a recording of Water Music, which led to her most recent arrangement.

Among her many arrangements, her bell choirs have played Handel's "Hallelujah" Chorus, Flight of the Bumblebee, the William Tell Overture and the Overture to The Marriage of Figaro.

"I want my music to be something that brings ringers joy and gives them a sense of accomplishment," she said. "I want to give the average person a chance to participate in something that will allow them to perform better than they would as an individual."

SELF PORTRAIT Martha Lynn Thompson

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH Dec. 14, 1940, Little Rock.

FAVORITE BELLS TO PLAY I prefer to play the larger ones [which are the lowest]. There's a limit to how large a bell I can pick up. But I usually played the lowest bells partly because when I was in a ladies' group, nobody else wanted to. I like the tone better. ... And you don't have to move so fast. You have to be patient to know that "Maybe I don't play as much as the high bells, but my bells are important."

SOME FAVORITE HYMNS "O for a Thousand Tongues" by Charles Wesley and "Hymn of Promise" by Natalie Sleeth.

SOMETHING PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT ME I make all my own clothes and most of my husband's — all his suits and most of his shirts.

LAST BOOK I READ Home to Holly Springs, part of Jan Karon's Mitford Series.

I ATTRIBUTE MY LONG MARRIAGE TO Learning to laugh together.

PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENT Being named an Honorary Life Member of the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers in 2001. The organization's highest honor is reserved "for those who have made outstanding contributions to the art of handbell ringing."

ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP Blessed.



